SHAREWARE

done

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LAF "SHARE" contains files "SHARE 1" "SHARE 2"

SHARE 1
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Software has always been a difficult commodity to market and distribute. Users want new software, they want support for their software purchases. What's more, EVERY computer buff likes to build up a big library of programs. Most are never or rarely used, but there is a certain element of the pack rat in all of us.

Suppliers for obsolete computers spend time and effort to produce new products for a dwindling customer base. It has been proven again and again that one stands a slim chance of making a profit in these "low-end" computers. Still, some will try. As long as there are buyers, there will be sellers. However, dealers and programmers want their efforts to be financially worthwhile.

These ideas have often clashed, with the one camp copying software for friends because the program is too expensive, and the other claiming that software was so expensive because many sales are "lost" to illegal clones. This affects not only our tiny corner of the computer world, but all computers and computerists. A resolution could come in a new software marketing concept called "Shareware" or "Fairware."

Copying programs is a fact of life. You do it. I do it. I've only actually paid for a portion of the programs I have in my collection. It is important to note, however, that out of these programs are a scant half-dozen I use all the time, and maybe a couple dozen I use occasionally. The rest were looked at once or twice, before being enshrined in "the files" (one of two big drawers full of tapes).

The fundamendal tenet is, "If you use it, pay for it." The most direct application of the "shareware principle" is to send a "shareware contribution" to the author of a cloned program that you are finding useful. (Obviously, no-one expects you to pay for something that you can't or don't want to use.) Unfortunately, it can be a real chore to locate the actual author of a given program, so all too often we either can't find a program at all, or if we do, we may not know where to send "whatever it's worth." Furthermore, human nature being what it is, it's all too easy to indefinitely procrastinate mailing that contribution.

When we freely clone programs from our friends, we have no recourse if we are missing part of the documentation, or if there are updates or improved versions available. How do you get unanswered questions answered, bugs debugged or at least de-fanged, gain added technical or background information? How do you reward the creators and developers of the programs you have in your library? Some programs are the product of several diverse individuals; how do you reward each one's part in the product? At the same time, how do you keep your computer from driving you into the poor-house?

The answer to these questions might be to expand and organize the concept of "shareware." I don't know if formal guidelines have ever been published, but "shareware" or "fairware" libraries are simply an organized way of paying fairly for what you are already using, and to make other programs available to you at reasonable cost. Shareware libraries are already in operation all over the continent.

The libraries freely exchange material, or even share a database of available programs. You purchase from your closest library, at a reasonable cost per program. In some cases, users can submit written updates, clarifications, and other discoveries to be included in the documentation file for any given program.

Dubbing, mailing and otherwise processing orders also needs to be covered and made worthwhile. The library therefore takes a moderate fee for these services, and splits the rest with the authors who contributed.

This is often done quarterly, with payments made in the quarter following the order-taking. A sliding scale can determines how much each author receives; obviously, a massive application should pay better than a simple arcade game. In principle, then, everyone gets a fair share of whatever interest remains in the field of users.

THE NEW ZX WORLD

There is something oddly "different" about the ZX81 family of computers, which spawned a massive wave of interest in the early '80's. Partly because the machine was improperly marketed, partly because development of the TS2068 was completed too late, and largely because of the overall market slump, Timex closed down the Timex Computer division. The TS2068 was in reality never truly completed, and new products that were prototyped never saw the light of day.

Yet in Europe, the ZX Spectrum, the prototype of the TS2068, was the most popular personal computer. (Never mind that it was mostly used for games, and never saw true development of its potentials.) So now we have two quite different machines, one very simple yet powerful, and the other even more powerful, both sharing that unique invention called Sinclair ZX BASIC. Both are proving to retain a lot of interest in a hard core of dedicated fanciers.

What's more, there are still new-comers to Sinclair-Timex computing. The TS1000 surplus is still being doled out into unsuspecting homes, and 2068's are around if you look for them. Other machines are "hand-me-downs" or are picked up at garage sales. Some of these machines will strike that same chord in a brand-new user, that it struck in all of us when we first started playing with them. There's something very neat about these little wonders.

Our ace-in-the-hole is that the ZX81 is simple enough to build completely from the ground up, and could be built from completely stock parts. By looking back at the ZX80 schematic, you realize that this machine will never become a fossil because of blown custom ULA or SCLD chips. (Wags might say it's because it's always BEEN a fossil.)

At any rate, we have a lot going for us. I think that a workable shareware system can be built up. It would involve a lot of work for many members of our community, but would be worth doing for the long-term rewards.

There are a number of ways of implementing this, but here are some comments that just might help to make it work for our little world.

HERE'S THE PLAN

The first step is to work up a common data-base of existing programs, cross-referenced and linked to author. In the case of multiple authorship, i.e. "chain" programs, the libraries are allowed a certain discretion in assigning merit for different levels of contribution.

Another massive chore will be to find the authors. This could be tricky in some instances, since many of these guys have given up their Timexes for a Mac at home and IBM's at work. Many have all but forgotten their experience with the ZX81 and Spectrum machines, perhaps because they'd rather not remember how hard they worked and how little they got out of it.

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We have to find these people, contact them, and interest them in the shareware notion. Most would be happy to release their "old" material, (it's a cheap way of gaining immortality!), especially if it means a token payment four times a year.

Some of them will regain interest, and will be inspired by the existence of the network into writing new programs. If the new programs are a hit, well then their royalty check will be appropriately bigger over the next few quarters.

Permission to place programs into shareware should be solicited on behalf of the entire library network. Similarly, libraries should adhere to an agreed-upon code of ethics regarding pricing, royalty payments, interchange and competition with other libraries.

We have to agree upon the billing formula. How do we keep it fair, yet reasonably simple? How much are users willing to pay, and how little are authors and libraries willing to receive? As a side-note, there could easily be instances of programs costing MORE through shareware, than they did when being retailed in the past.

Some of the other problems we'll run into include topics like media; obviously a tape dubbing operation is more cost-intensive than if programs are supplied on disk. Note that since the software library gets a percentage based on dubbing and photocopying time, the more efficient its information transferring method is, the better off we'll all be. TS2068 libraries would be at a distinct advantage because of shorter saving/loading times. Perhaps we should adopt a standardized fast-load tape routine for both computer types. How about making TS1000 programs available in TS2068 format? (See Kent Cook's article in SWN 5:1.) Customers buying in this format would get a price-break.

A shareware library, to be viable, should have all programs rapidly accessible on disk. Which disk standards are supported will depend on which system that each library has available. For instance, at this writing I could supply tapes or Compusa disks for ZX81, with Larken disks being the next stage. I could therefore be a librarian for this subset of Timex users.

How do we most effectively use the modem options? Can some if not all of our shareware transactions be conducted via FidoNet or Compuserve?

How do we catalog the entries, and their various versions? How do we agree on a catalog system? Or do we need to?

(As an example of this last point, I have recently decided to catalog two drawers of tapes and a bunch of disordered disks. At this point, my VU-FILE on archived programs has over 400 entries. I estimate that a total of 600 entries will result from just the stuff that I have. [Some of it was even written by me.] Many have multiple versions, of course; the record-holder is Memotext, with some 30 different versions, not counting the help files).

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Assuming that we can cross these hurdles, the overall snowballing effect might just surprise us all. We have discussed this briefly at SWN, and were excited with the possibiliies. Imagine... all or almost all programs ever written available to anyone, with their creators getting a fair slice of the pie.

I'm sure that I speak for everyone at SyncWare News, when I say that we will definitely be involved in some way, perhaps as a shareware library co-ordinator. We will try to set up proposed guidelines for shareware library facilities. I'm prepared to be a "node," with my collection of ZX programs, and I'm sure that Jeff, Basil and Tom would be happy to become personally involved at some level also.

You asked us to move you, shake you. We're moving, are you shaking yet? If you felt even the slightest tremor, let us know. This just might be what it takes to allow our machines to survive, and open the door to new machines that have even more capability.

SHARE-WARE UPDATE

This will be an as-needed column to help in the exchange of shareware information. This time, let's start at ground zero, with some author locations.

Does anyone know where Ray Kingsley is? Hot-Z II and the several Hot-Z 2068 versions will always be on demand. As a long-time pioneer of the share-ware idea, I think he'd be delighted to get a few checks once in awhile.

Does anyone know who wrote Memotext? Does anyone know anything about Memotech at all? How to get in touch with John Reidy, who wrote Memocalc?

Anyone with Sinclair connections "across the pond," let yourself be heard. In the U.K. and elsewhere in Europe, the Spectrum family is still very popular. However, even the ZX81 has a small but loyal following. There have been some amazing programs written in Europe, that we have never even heard of, let alone seen in action.

SHARE 2

How do we handle programs that appeared in magazines? Suggestions, comments, legal info, would all be much appreciated. Meanwhile, we'll be doing the best we can.